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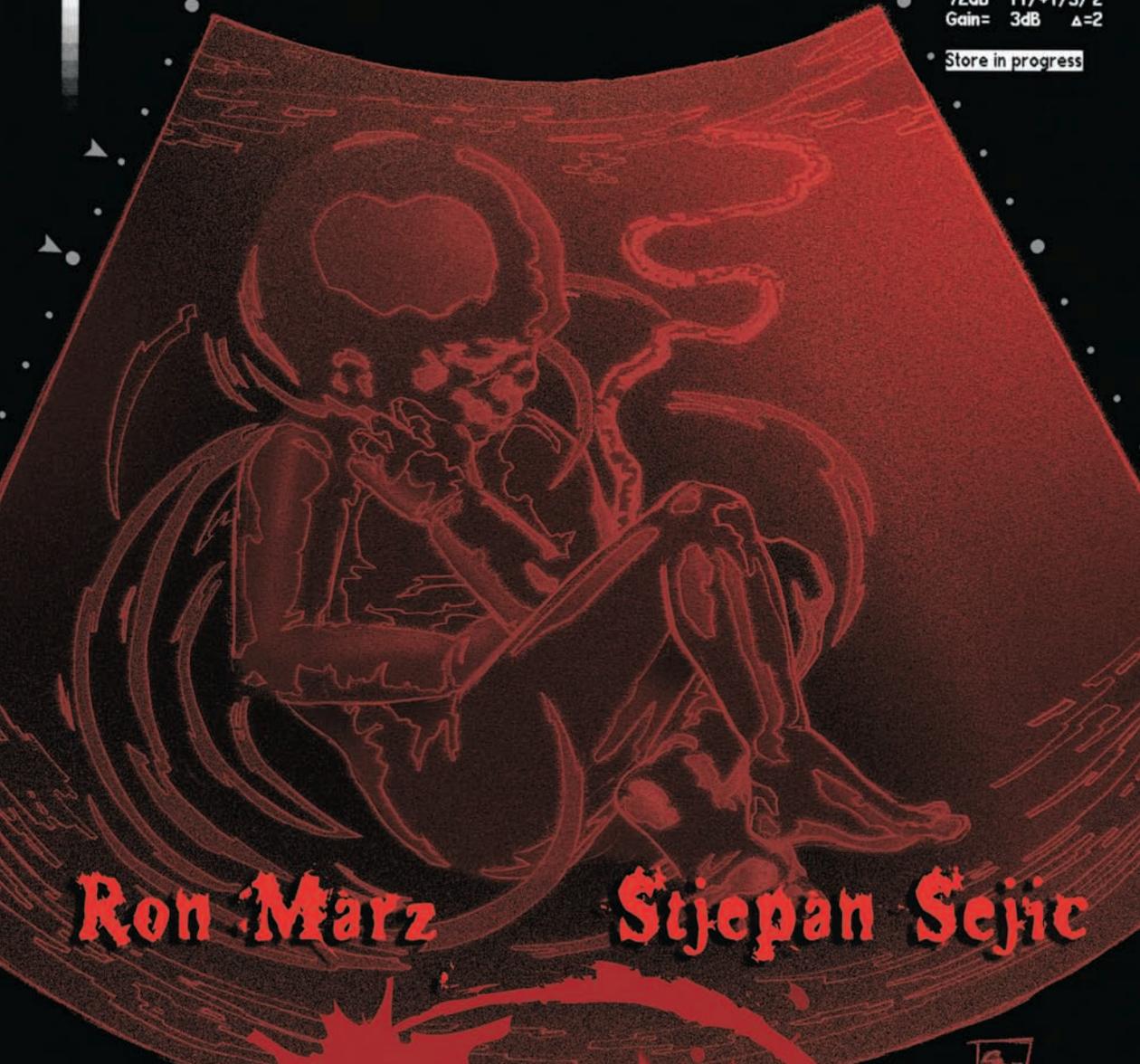


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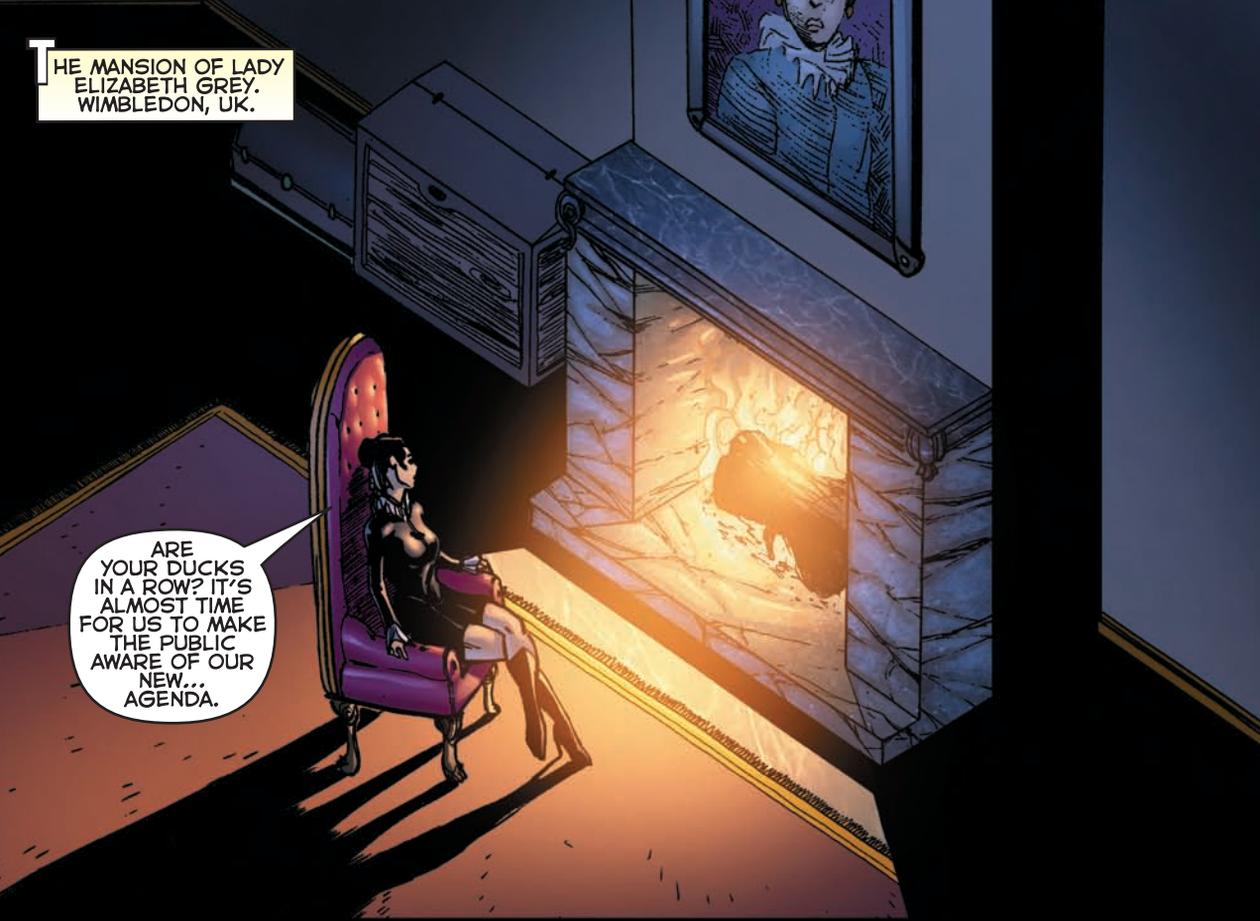
FIRST BORN™

...And Baby Makes Three!

First Look Delivering June 2007

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THE MANSION OF LADY ELIZABETH GREY. WIMBLEDON, UK.



ARE YOUR DUCKS IN A ROW? IT'S ALMOST TIME FOR US TO MAKE THE PUBLIC AWARE OF OUR NEW... AGENDA.



LADY GREY, I SPENT DECADES LOST IN NIGHTMARISH DIMENSIONS FULL OF MAGIC AND MONSTERS. MORE THAN ANYONE, I'M READY FOR THIS MOMENT.



MY OBSERVATIONS OF POSITRON LEAD ME TO BELIEVE THAT HE'S VERY CLOSE TO CREATING A DEVICE THAT WILL UNCOVER THE PORTALS.



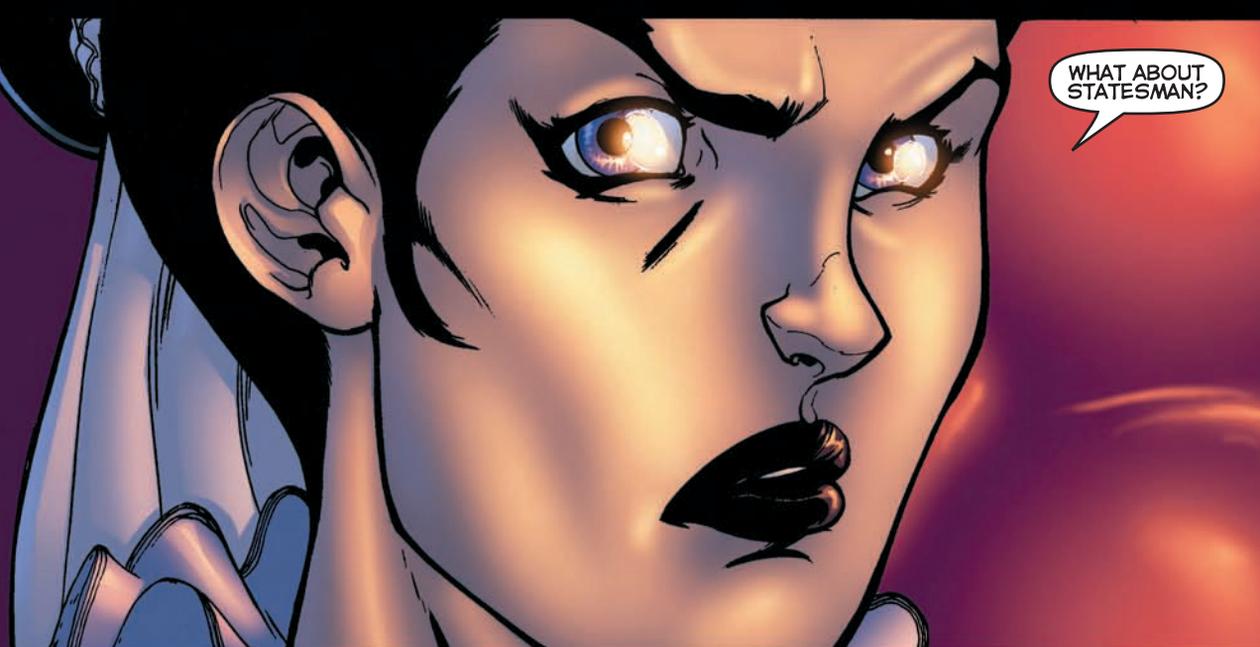
AND THE OTHERS? WE ALWAYS KNEW THE FREEDOM PHALANX MIGHT BE A PROBLEM.



THE SISTERS WILL BE MAKING AN OFFER TO MANTICORE. SYNAPSE IS UNLIKELY TO BE AN ISSUE, AND I STILL BELIEVE THAT SISTER PSYCHE WILL BE HER OWN WORST ENEMY IN THE COMING WAR.



YOU HAD BETTER BE RIGHT. WE CAN'T AFFORD TO HAVE THEM IN OUR WAY.



WHAT ABOUT STATESMAN?

Passing the Torch

PART 1 OF 2

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LEAVE
MARCUS TO
ME, AFTER ALL,
WE'RE OLD
FRIENDS. I
THINK IT'S TIME
FOR HIM TO
KNOW... THE
DARK WATCHER
IS BACK.*

*SEE THE WEB OF
ARACHNOS NOVEL.

POSITRON'S
LABORATORY,
PARAGON CITY,
RHODE
ISLAND, USA.



I'M FINE,
SYNAPSE, BUT
I NEED THOSE
PIECES OF
SALVAGE IF THIS
THING IS EVER
GOING TO
WORK. I HOPE
THE OTHERS
DON'T LET ME
DOWN.



THE
INCREASED
RIKTI ACTIVITY YOU
DETECTED REALLY
HAS YOU WORKED
UP. RELAX, MAN.
I'VE GOT NOTHING
BUT FAITH IN YOU.
I'M SURE YOUR
DELIVERIES WILL
BE HERE ANY
MIN--

BZZZZ

WHAT
DID I TELL
YOU, I BET
THAT'S THEM
NOW!



COME ON IN GANG, THE GENIUS IS IN.



I HOPE THIS ASSISTS YOUR PROJECT. CONSIDER US EVEN.

THERE'S NO WAY I COULD FINISH WITHOUT IT, ASCENDANT. WE'RE NOT EVEN. NOW I OWE YOU ONE.



LOOKS LIKE A FIRE SALE AT AN ELECTRONICS STORE IN HERE.

I'VE BEEN SAYING THAT FOR YEARS, BEEF CAKE.



WHAT'S THIS THING SUPPOSED TO DO, ANYWAY?



I CAN'T REALLY TALK ABOUT IT RIGHT NOW, CASTLE. IF YOU COME BACK LATER THIS WEEK I MAY NEED YOUR HELP AGAIN. IN THE MEANTIME WHY DON'T YOU ALL GRAB AN ENHANCEMENT AS A REWARD.



BE CAREFUL OF THE SECRETS YOU KEEP, THEY COULD BRING ABOUT YOUR DESTRUCTION.

IGNORE MISTER DOOM AND GLOOM BUT... DO YOU MAYBE HAVE A BADGE INSTEAD?



ON THAT NOTE, I THINK IT'S TIME FOR ME TO MAKE SOME ENHANCEMENTS OF MY OWN.



WELL, THAT WAS SURREAL. THIS CITY HAS SOME INTERESTING HEROES.

WITHOUT THEM, THERE WOULD BE NO PARAGON CITY. NEVER FORGET THAT.

F REEDOM PHALANX
HEADQUARTERS.
PARAGON CITY.

SO...
YOU JUST
LET HER
GO?

YEP.
KEEPING HER
HERE AGAINST
HER WILL WASN'T
HELPING
ANYONE.*

*SEE LAST
ISSUE.

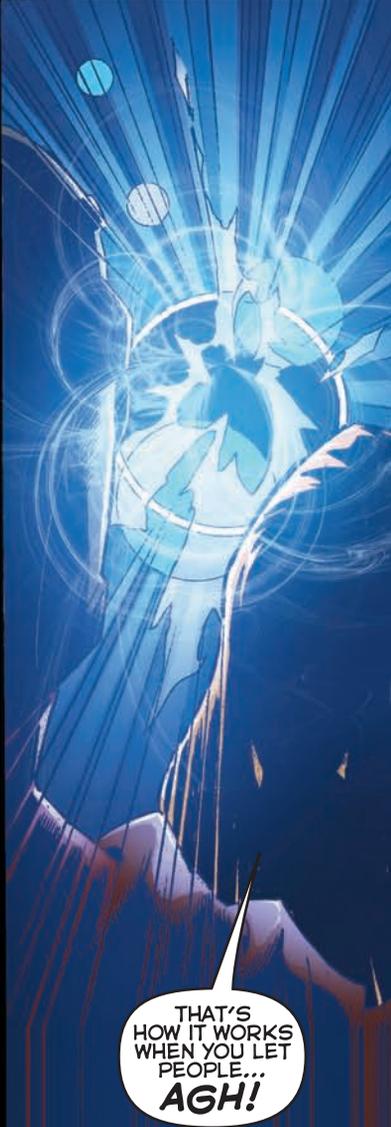


I WANTED
HER TO HAVE A
CHANCE TO SEE
THAT THINGS
COULD BE
DIFFERENT.



AND SHE
DID, GRANDFATHER,
BUT IF DOMINATRIX IS
GOING TO CHANGE IT
HAS TO BE HER
CHOICE.

AT LEAST
SHE KNOWS
WHAT OUR
UNIVERSE HAS
TO OFFER, BUT
I GUESS WE'LL
SEE, WON'T
WE?



THAT'S
HOW IT WORKS
WHEN YOU LET
PEOPLE...
AGH!



HELLO, STATESMAN. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME.

DEVON?!



THAT'S RIGHT, MARCUS, IT'S ME. ARE YOU SURPRISED?

WE THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD, DEVON.

DID YOU EVEN LOOK FOR ME? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT I WENT THROUGH OUT THERE?



HOLD ON A MINUTE, SON, NONE OF US HAD THE ABILITY TO EVEN BEGIN TRACKING YOU ACROSS DIMENSIONS.

I SUPPOSE NONE OF THAT MATTERS NOW. THIS ISN'T A REUNION, IT'S A WARNING.

THERE'S A WAR COMING. ONE YOU AREN'T PREPARED TO WAGE. WHEN THE TIME COMES, YOU NEED TO STEP ASIDE.



OH, ONE MORE THING... I'M NOT YOUR SON.



WAS THAT... THE DARK WATCHER I'VE HEARD YOU TALK ABOUT?

THAT WAS HIM... BUT NOT THE ONE I USED TO KNOW.



SINCLAIR ESTATE.
PARAGON CITY.

FRANKLY I'M
GLAD DOMINATRIX
HEADED BACK TO
PRAETORIAN EARTH.
SHE WAS A BIGGER
PAIN THAN ME.

DON'T SELL
YOURSELF SHORT,
SHALICE. NO ONE
COULD BE A
BIGGER PAIN
THAN YOU.

WHY, JUSTIN,
ARE YOU FLIRTING
WITH ME OR JUST
LOOKING TO
HAVE THE TASTE
SLAPPED OUT
OF YOUR
MOUTH?

WE'VE GOT
COMPANY.

I KNOW. I
HEARD THEM
COMING.

I GUESS
MAYBE NINJA
SCHOOL
DIDN'T PAY
OFF AFTER
ALL.

YOU SEE,
BOREA, SISTER
PSYCHE IS
EVERY BIT AS
AMUSING AS
WE'D HEARD.

WE'RE
NOT HERE TO
EXCHANGE
PLEASANTRIES,
LEVANTERA,
MANTICORE,
WE NEED TO
SPEAK TO YOU
PRIVATELY.

ANYTHING YOU HAVE TO SAY TO ME CAN BE SAID IN FRONT OF SISTER PSYCHE. SHE'D JUST LISTEN IN MENTALLY ANYWAY.



WE REPRESENT VANGUARD. WE NEED A NEW SECURITY HEAD AND WE BELIEVE YOU'RE IT.

IT'S AN OFFER YOU SHOULDN'T REFUSE. WHAT DO YOU THINK, MANTICORE? DO YOU WANT TO BE THE NEW SWORD OF VANGUARD?

BESIDES, IF YOU THINK I'M LEAVING HIM ALONE WITH YOU SNOW WHITE AND ROSE RED WANNABES, YOU'RE CRAZIER THAN YOU LOOK.



IN CASE YOU LADIES HAVEN'T NOTICED, I USE A BOW NOT A SWORD. I KNOW VANGUARD'S REPUTATION SO I TELL YOU WHAT, I'LL THINK ABOUT IT.

THIS OFFER EXPIRES TODAY SO DON'T THINK TOO LONG.



HOPES TO SEE YOU SOON, TIGER.

I'M A LION, WHY IS THAT SO HARD FOR PEOPLE?

WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

TROUBLE.





I HAVE ALMOST EVERYTHING I NEED NOW. I'M GETTING CLOSE. I CAN FEEL IT.



I LOVE THIS PART. IT'S LIKE DOUBLE JEOPARDY WHERE THE SCORES CAN REALLY CHANGE.



HEY, GUYS.



WHAT'S THE POINT OF BEING A GHOST IF YOU CAN'T HAVE A LITTLE FUN? I BROUGHT THAT SPIRITUAL ESSENCE YOU WERE LOOKING FOR, POSITRON. HAVE YOU FIGURED OUT A WAY TO MAKE ME CORPOREAL AGAIN?



WAR WITCH! I HATE IT WHEN YOU DO THAT.



I'M SORRY. I'VE BEEN DISTRACTED BY THIS PROJECT. I HAVE MADE SOME PROGRESS ON YOUR CONDITION, THOUGH.



YOU FIGURED OUT HOW TO MAKE HALF OF ME PHASE IN?



NOT EXACTLY. I DISCOVERED A WAY TO PHASE PEOPLE OUT. NOW I JUST NEED TO DETERMINE A WAY TO REVERSE THE PROCESS.



I SUPPOSE THIS IS PART OF WHAT I SIGNED ON FOR. IF I HAVE TO STAY IN THIS FORM, SO BE IT. LET ME KNOW IF YOU MAKE ANY MORE PROGRESS.



SHE'S PUTTING ON A GOOD FRONT BUT THE KID IS TORN UP. I HOPE WHATEVER YOU'RE BUILDING IS AS IMPORTANT AS YOU THINK IT IS.



IF I'M RIGHT, THE FUTURE OF PARAGON CITY DEPENDS ON IT.



VANGUARD BASE, RIKTI CRASH SITE, PARAGON CITY.

I TOLD YOU HE WAS GETTING CLOSE. HE'LL FINISH BEFORE THE DAY IS OUT.

WHAT HAPPENED WITH MANTICORE?



I SPOKE TO STATESMAN BUT I DOUBT HE'LL LISTEN, ESPECIALLY IF POSITRON CRIES WOLF. WE NEED TO BE PREPARED FOR A MORE DIRECT ENGAGEMENT.



IT WAS AN ATTRACTIVE ENOUGH OFFER FOR HIM TO THINK ABOUT.

NO, IT WASN'T. HE ONLY SAID THAT TO STALL FOR TIME. WE NEED TO GO WITH OUR OTHER OPTION.



WE SHOULD CONSULT WITH SERPENT DRUMMER ON THAT. I'LL SUMMON HIM.

Om MANI PADME HUNG.



GREETINGS.

YIKES! GIVE A GUY A LITTLE WARNING BEFORE YOU DO THAT. WE COULDA' BEEN IN THE SHOWER OR SOMETHING.



WE'RE GOING WITH GAUSSIAN INSTEAD OF MANTICORE. YOU ALL RIGHT WITH THAT?

FINE. I NEVER TRUSTED THE ARCHER. HE IS TOO... UNDISCIPLINED.

WHAT'S WITH THE MONKEY? I THOUGHT YOU WERE A SNAKE MAN.

THE SPIRITS THAT AID ME WERE A GIFT FROM A DYING FRIEND. THEY ARE A BLESSING...AND A RESPONSIBILITY.



BESIDES, TOOTS, I'M THE BRAINS OF THE OPERATION.

NOW THAT I BELIEVE.



AS AMUSING AS THIS ALL IS, WE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM AT HAND. THE FREEDOM PHALANX IS GOING TO BE MORE OF AN ISSUE THAN WE'D HOPED.

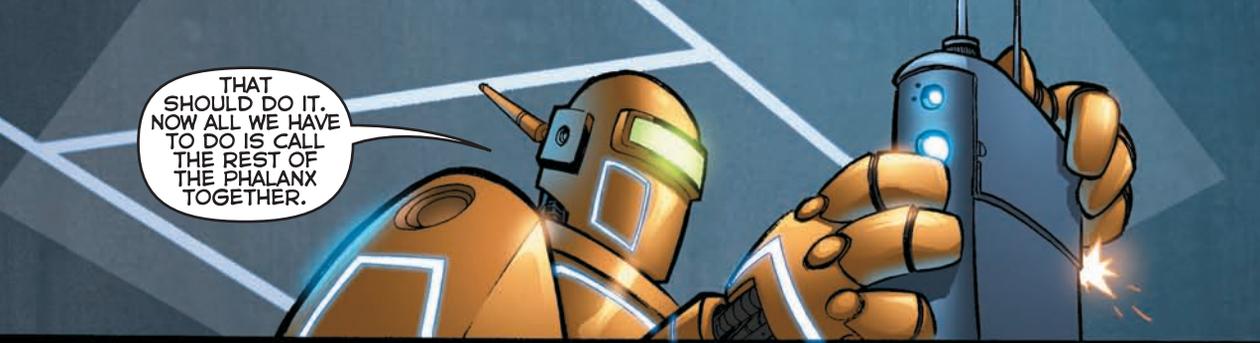
WE DISCUSSED THIS CONTINGENCY AND WILL DO WHATEVER IS NECESSARY.



WE HAVEN'T EVEN COMPLETED OUR RECRUITING.

THAT DOESN'T MATTER NOW. THE FIVE OF US WILL DEAL WITH IT IF GAUSSIAN CAN'T MAKE IT IN TIME.

INDEED.



THAT SHOULD DO IT. NOW ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS CALL THE REST OF THE PHALANX TOGETHER.



HEY, EVERYBODY, IT'S GROUP MIND LINK TIME. WE HAVE A PROBLEM.



HOW DID YOU KNOW I WAS ABOUT TO CONTACT YOU? DO YOU KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE RIKTI ACTIVITY?

WE DIDN'T KNOW AND THAT ISN'T THE PROBLEM SHE'S TAKING ABOUT.



THEN YOU KNOW THE DARK WATCHER IS BACK?



THAT ISN'T WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT EITHER... BUT IT MAKES SENSE. WE NEED TO MEET SOMEWHERE.



SYNAPSE AND I WERE HEADED TO THE RIKTI CRASH SITE. EVERYONE MEET THERE.



ALL RIGHT. WHAT'S GOING ON, MANTICORE?

I GOT A VISIT FROM A COUPLE MEMBERS OF VANGUARD. I'D HEARD THEY WERE RECRUITING UP FOR SOMETHING BIG, BUT I DIDN'T EXPECT THEM TO COME AFTER ME.

AS TO WHY WE'RE AT THE CRASH SITE, YOU HAVE TO ASK POSITRON.

I'VE BEEN MONITORING INCREASED RIKTI ACTIVITY FOR MONTHS NOW. THEY'RE PLANNING SOMETHING, SO I CREATED THIS SCANNER TO FIND OUT WHAT.



THAT MUST BE WHAT THE DARK WATCHER WAS WARNING ME TO STAY AWAY FROM. VANGUARD IS GOING TO TAKE ON THE RIKTI.

AND THEY DON'T WANT US TO COME OUT AND PLAY WITH THEM.

WELL, THE WAY I SEE IT...WE'RE HERE FIRST SO THEY CAN JUST GET IN LINE. WHICH WAY, POSI?



THIS WAY. I'M GETTING THE STRONGEST READINGS DOWN HERE.

GREAT, IS THIS GONNA BE ANOTHER SEWER MISSION?





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CITY OF VILLAINS

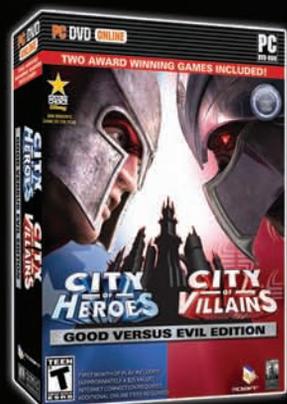
EVIL EDITION



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IN STORES NOW!





UH,
GUYS... I THINK
WE MIGHT HAVE
FOUND WHAT
THE RIKTI ARE
UP TO.

WE CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON SYNAPSE TO STATE THE...

OOF!

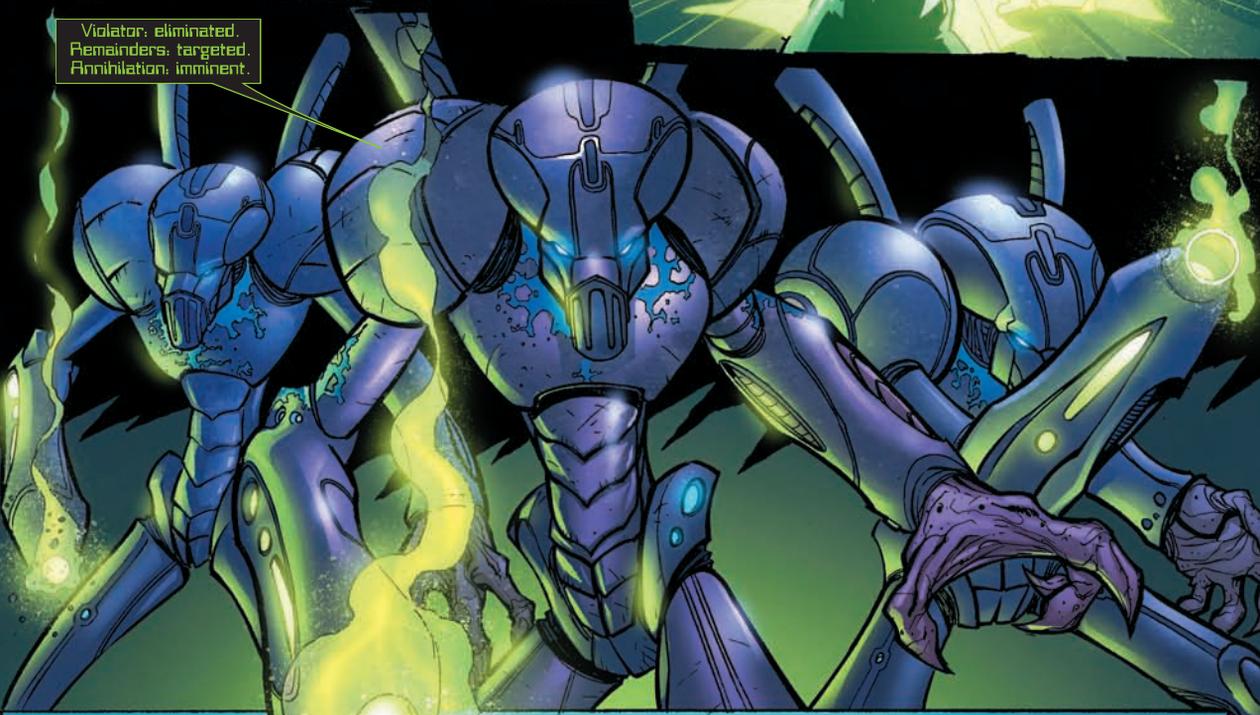


WHAT THE...?

AAARRRGH!



Violator: eliminated.
Remainders: targeted.
Annihilation: imminent.



WE'RE IN IT! DEFENSIVE POSITIONS, NOW!





DEFENSIVE
POSITIONS MY
BUTT... SOMEONE'S
GOING DOWN.

THOK

CHAK

SHUK

STATESMAN,
YOU AND MS.
LIBERTY GO
FOR THE PORTAL.
WE'LL HOLD
THEM OFF.

OH, SURE,
WE'LL HOLD
THEM OFF. AND
EVERYONE SAYS
I'M THE CRAZY
ONE.



YOU WANT HIM... YOU HAVE TO COME THROUGH ME.







SURRENDER
OR
PERISH.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Paragon City's *ONLY* source for the TRUTH

FANTASTIC FAN ART!
from the City of Heroes Community. PAGE 6



THE PARAGON TATTLE

April, 2007

\$2.75

Paladine



Part 2, PAGE 2



26 Seconds

-- not time enough to decide the fate of thousands of living beings, or the worth of one's own heart.

PAGE 5

THE FURTHER MISADVENTURES OF

Q-4ORCE

PAGE 7



Paladine, Part 2

By Goth_Angel

As the entity coalesced before them, the assembled scientists and heroes heard its “birth-cry.” Some present realized the potential embodied in this new being. Though in body a man, his mind was less than a child’s. Absolute innocence, insatiable curiosity, overwhelming desire to learn, these were the defining characteristics of the young man whom some would anoint “the world’s first, true innocent.” He was presented to the leaders of the nation, both political and heroic, and they decided his fate. He would be trained, taught to be everything he could be, raised as an ideal. But he would be hidden, he would be their secret. And above all, he would be watched.

His quick charm and infectious attitude made him a favorite among his teachers. He hungrily learned everything put before him. Though he did well in his studies, he always had difficulty understanding relationships with others. He was always well liked, as who could not like such an honest, open, vulnerable creature, but he could never truly understand the motivations of others, their emotional states. He wanted to empathize with others, but this was not enough to help him overcome the limitations which set him apart from humans, making him forever a little uneasy in their presence. Perhaps it stemmed from an eternity of loneliness; or perhaps it was a result of his great transformation from being the only thing in his universe to being a very small part of theirs. Regardless of the cause, he never quite fit in with others, seeming the perpetual alien.

When he was ready to face the world, they dressed him in white, and yellow, and scarlet. They placed a burning star upon his chest, and draped a scarlet cape from his shoulders. His cover story was released to the press. A vague story of a far-flung alien world, from where he had been sent to protect the Earth, to learn from our heroes. True enough in its own way.

He was indoctrinated in the ways of the hero. He was taught by some of the best; the greatest beings on Earth impressed upon him what it meant to sacrifice everything for the innocent. Most were mentors to him, but a few became dear friends. Of these, the one he grew closest to, was Jill Pastor, of Skyway City. More than a contact, they became the closest of friends, one of the few humans with whom he felt he could share. Treating him as a friend, almost like a son, she helped to indoctrinate



him into human culture, exposing him to her own interests and loves, giving him a taste of what it was to truly be human.

He grew under the love and care of those to whom he had been entrusted. His heart learned what it was to be human.

And before her death in the war, the young witch, who had loved him from the first, was the one who named him. She saw all the possibility of absolute goodness, the innocence, the pure love from him, and baptized him Paladine.

Empty now, cried out, Paladine floated among the evening wisps of clouds. His phone buzzed urgently inside his belt, demanding his attention. Deliberately, dreading the confrontation he assumed was coming, he reached for it and flipped it open.

“You ok?” Jill asked.

He cleared his throat, thinking about the question, and finally answered, “No, but I’m a lot better than I was. I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I was really worried about you. You sounded terrible and then you wouldn’t answer the phone...Want to talk about it?”

He realized she must have read the journal by now. For a moment he worried the whole world might know about it by now. He hung his head in shame as he hovered a mile above the waters in the still night sky, seeing in his head, all the destruction, all the grief his other self had caused. The blasted city appeared before his mind’s eye, the lost souls of all those doomed to an eternity of restless suffering, and he began to weep anew.

Paladine Continued

He was almost surprised that other heroes weren't hunting him down to destroy him. He said so.

"Pal, that wasn't you. YOU didn't do that." She scolded, like a mother telling a rebellious youth to behave.

"It was my writing, it was my name. I did that to that world, or at least a version of me did. What makes you think it couldn't happen here? I'm not human, what happens if I go crazy? That Paladine murdered every living creature of that Earth. Why shouldn't everyone be afraid of me?" He rattled out quickly, almost afraid to pause, afraid of the answers.

The phone was silent for a moment as she waited to ensure he was done.

"I'll tell you why I'm not afraid, why I know it couldn't happen here. I trust you. And so does everyone who knows you. At your core, you are good." She stopped, pausing for the words to sink

in, then she continued. "In this galaxy, there's a mathematical probability of three million Earth-type planets. And in all of the universe, three million, million galaxies like this. And in all of that and perhaps more, only one of each of us. Don't destroy the one named Paladine." She said, quoting a speech by Doctor McCoy to Captain Kirk from his favorite television show.

He began laughing out loud, tears coming from his eyes, this time in joy rather than pain. She knew how much he loved Star Trek.

"OK Jill, you win. I'll be back in, in a minute, 'Mom'." He said smiling, still laughing and wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

He heard her smile as she said, "Good."

Paladine replaced the phone in his belt and began the flight back to Peregrine Island. He smiled as he flew and decided that even though he did not completely understand what it was to be human, he loved them.

THE END

26 Seconds

By Richard Raymer (ParadigmShift)

26 seconds -- not time enough to decide the fate of thousands of living beings, or the worth of one's own heart.

Randall Morrow studied the obviously jury-rigged device before him. The mask of ParadigmShift covered his furrowed brow and the battle within himself.

In the doorway of the sparsely-furnished Perez Park office, MsTaken finished the last of the Crey Security they had known would be waiting. Despite his turmoil, Morrow smiled slightly as his blue-skinned teammate twirled her finger in time to the spinning, armor-clad Power Tank held by her gravity control.

A few feet behind ParadigmShift, Cerebral Tempest stood stolidly, an unconscious Agent at his feet. ParadigmShift studied the countdown timer: 0026.

* * *

Although it seemed like days, it was only hours ago that Morrow's phone rang at his desk at the PPD.

"Homicide."

"Detective Morrow?" asked a young female voice.

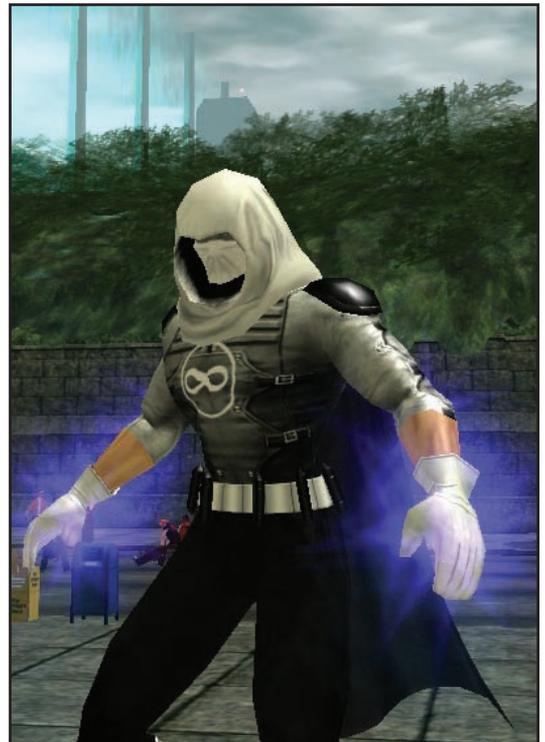
"Speaking."

Hesitantly, the voice replied, "We need an attitude adjustment."

The Detective immediately recognized the coded meeting request and asked, "Where and when?"

At her reply, Morrow lowered the receiver, donned his jacket. On his way out, he stopped at the Lieutenant's office.

"Heading out on a tip, Leu.," he tossed, continuing his momentum toward the door.



26 Seconds Continued

The Lieutenant started, "Stop ducking out on your partner, MORR--," before realizing the detective was already gone.

* * *

Scolie's was a dive in south King's Row. Inside, Morrow took a seat in a dark booth across from a woman he recognized from the Crey main office. She slid a manila folder to him across the dingy surface.

"You have a WMD moving through Paragon," she spoke evenly.

Visions of Siren's Call flashed across his mind as he began to rise.

"Nothing quite like that," she quickly added, and the PPD Detective realized she was reading his mind.

"Sorry ... just trying to save time. Listen. I realize most of what my company does isn't exactly above board, but this is too much. Read that file, but do it quickly. There isn't much time."

* * *

In Perez, ParadigmShift glared at the makeshift wiring of the device. When thinking what it would do if activated, the moral surety he normally felt evaporated. He could feel his teammates' concern as they looked on. The timer read: 0022.

* * *

Upon returning to the department earlier that afternoon, Morrow had perused the envelope. He read the case of a Crey scientist named Sam Rawlings. Years ago, he and his parents had walked through Perez early in the park's occupation by "deadlies," department slang for the thousands of villains who gather there. A confrontation ensued.

"Parents killed right in front of him," he said to no one. He skipped ahead to the science prodigy's internship at Crey, and then his subsequent neural research as a full-fledged Crey researcher. His experiments resulted in a device that could actually differentiate between "good" and "evil" impulses in the brain. It could also generate a broadcastable neutralizing agent; one that would kill the affected individual. He immediately realized the scientist's plan.

* * *

"You OK, 'Shift?" MsTaken asked, bringing ParadigmShift back to the present. The room was quiet, the fight over. He turned his hooded gaze from the device for a moment to look into his friend's questioning eyes.

"I'll be alright," he replied. But would he ever

be again? Memories flashed across the screen of his mind, showing the Park as it once was. Like New York's Central Park, it provided a much-needed dose of nature in an otherwise urban landscape. Families could once picnic in an area now covered with Heliions, lovers had strolled along creeks now occupied by zombies and their keepers, and workers used to be able to get to their jobs without risking their lives at the hands of gangs. Isn't the return of that picturesque idea worth the lives of those who'd gladly use an innocent's body parts to experiment with?

* * *

Dr. Rawlings echoed that sentiment earlier in a gritty interrogation room. "Think about it, Detective, when word gets out that Perez is safe again, families -- actual families -- will be able to take advantage of the park after so many years. Are you protecting the monsters now? Do you for one moment think you could walk into Perez without some hero to back you up? Are those things what you vowed to protect and serve?"

"Is that what you're looking for? Recognition? Heroism?" Detective Morrow retorted.

"Heroes..." Rawlings muttered, lowering his gaze to the table, "What the world *needs* are ordinary people."

"The device will be in the Park," the Crey woman had said. "The War Walls stop the waves it uses to carry the agent, but inside, there's practically no limit to the range."

"How's it disarmed?"

She replied, "Rawlings is a brilliant particle theorist, but not an electrical engineer, and not very trusting. It's possibly something simple like red and black wires to a lantern battery. The transmitter's the biggest current draw."

* * *

After changing to ParadigmShift and enlisting aid, it took only a few moments for the Forever League members to find the only building in the Park with Crey guards. The ensuing fight was fierce, but swift.

For the hundredth time in the past few moments, ParadigmShift grilled himself, *I've got the opportunity to completely change the face of the city. I can give the people a place to come again and give the cops some leverage against the monsters at the same time -- turn the park back into what it was **intended** to be. When I was a child I loved Perez Park.*

An unbidden thought entered his mind, "**A child, you say? My friend, remember...**"

The hero fell into the past; into memory so recent, it stung.

* * *

It didn't take long before the cry of someone in trou-

26 Seconds Continued

ble reached his ears. Descending quickly, he spotted the Skull attempting to steal a purse. The problem for the Skull was the purse's owner was winning the struggle.

Looking closer, it didn't take ParadigmShift long to see why. God, he's nothing more than a kid -- can't be more than eleven or twelve, *he thought, hovering closely behind the inexperienced criminal.*

"Y'know, that makeup would be a lot scarier if you got it right," the hero commented, getting the boy's attention. Knowing he'd been discovered, the Skull released the purse and fingered the pistol in his jacket.

"Now, why would a kid throw a bunch of stuff on his face and steal a purse from an old lady? A lady who, by the way, was about to kick your butt," ParadigmShift taunted. The next couple of seconds'll tell the story. He'll either go for the gun or...

He bolted. The hero was tempted to let him escape with the lesson learned, but remembered a small caliber bulge in the child's jacket. A second later, he had a grip on the jacket and took the child soaring into the King's Row night sky.

"You're probably tempted to slide out of that jacket onto the closest roof, but you know that gun goes with it, right? Where'd it come from? Dad's locker?"

"Freak!" the boy squeaked, his last bravado amid rising panic that he'd stepped into something way too big. "OK," the hero replied, "Look below. What'cha see? A cop. HE gets you, you're in trouble. Dad comes down to the station, probably grounds you 'til you're eighteen. Now, take a look to your left..."

What the boy saw on a nearby roof froze his heart...

It is one thing to hear the Circle of Thorns spoken of quietly at a sleepover, a flashlight shining on the storyteller's face. It is another thing to see the boogeyman incarnate, bathed in a green glow -- not the green of grass, but the green of bile, vomit, and death.

"Now if HE gets ahold of you, it's all ov--," ParadigmShift continued, then stopped, realizing the child

was shaking.

Not a hard case after all...just a kid. Somebody's son.

Somebody's father...

...uncle...

...or brother...

The hero blinked rapidly, recovering from the memory and finding himself before the device again.

Understanding poured over him like a waterfall, focusing him. *How many of those "monsters" out there are mere children, teenagers, or desperates waiting for an example of leadership or compassion? Trapped with seemingly nowhere else to go...no future... thinking no one cares.*

The tension he had felt for hours left his body as he made the decision he knew he must.

There'll have to be another way, he thought as, with 5 seconds to spare, he gently pulled the power wire from the device.

Silence.

Soon, "Kinda worried me there, 'Shift. Looked like you weren't gonna stop it for a minute," MsTaken said as she approached.

"Don't be ridiculous," he responded without looking, instead his eyes were focused on Cerebral Tempest, whose aloof and dispassionate exterior concealed a considerable complexity.

"Thank you," he stated quietly, away from MsTaken.

"No need, my friend," the normally silent Cerebral Tempest replied, "besides, you knew the correct path already."

"Maybe I just needed a reminder..." ParadigmShift whispered, heading toward the building's door. Seeing the multitude of villains milling about, the heroes took to the air.

"...of why we're here."

THE END



FANTASTIC FAN ART!

WindSong Sonic/Storm on Infinity
By John Millington

Valentine
By Soulasylum



Crimson Storm
By Douglas Shuler/Darkjedi

MORE Fan Art on Page 8!

Q4ORCE

THE MIGHTY MODERATELY AVERAGE SUPER-TEAM

by Aaron Williams • www.py238.com



THIS IS AN AWFUL LOT OF TROUBLE JUST TO BLOW UP A GIANT ANTENNA.

STATESMAN THINKS IT'S FOR LORD RECLUSE'S NEW POWER SOURCE.

WHATEVER RECLUSE HAS IT FOR, IT CAN'T BE GOOD.

WITH ALL THESE WIRES, IT LOOKS MORE LIKE THE BACKSIDE OF SIDEBURN'S ENTERTAINMENT CENTER.

VERY PERCEPTIVE, INSECT...



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YOU WATCH "DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES?"

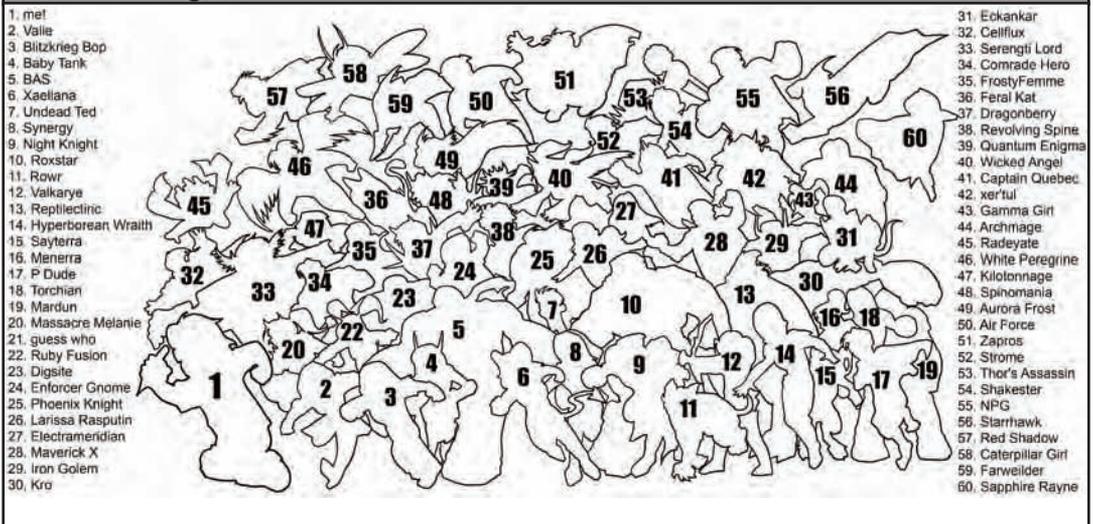
I'LL BET YOU'RE STEALING YOUR CABLE FEED, AREN'T YOU?

FOOL! WHO DO YOU THINK OWNS PARAGON CABLE?

I KNEW IT!

I WONDERED WHY CALLING THE HELP DESK ALWAYS ENDED WITH MANIACAL LAUGHTER...

Group Pic
By Alex Dai



The Paragon Tattler Fan Art & Fiction Submission Guidelines are now Online! FOR THE SCOOP ON HOW YOU CAN BE A TATTLE-TALE TOO VISIT US AT http://www.cityofheroes.com/community/fansubmission_guidelines.html

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Greg Horn.*

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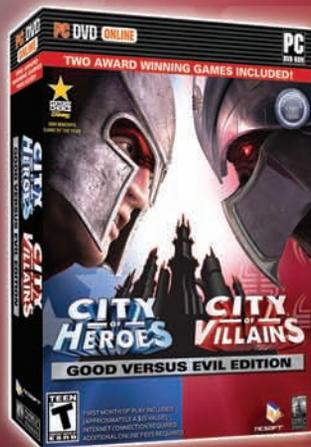
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